**Geography of the Plains: Navigation Tools and Isolation**

**Navigation Tools**

Travel along the Santa Fe Trail in the 1830s and 1840s lacked the technology that we depend on today. There were no phones or GPS systems for guidance. Descriptive maps were hard to come by and the landscape of the Plains didn’t change for hundreds of miles. Josiah Gregg was both cautious and captivated by the vastness of the land. He is reminded of another earth feature when he states, “This tract of country may truly be styled the grand prairie ocean; for not a single landmark is to be seen for more than forty miles-scarcely a visible eminence by which to direct one’s course. All is as level as the sea, and the compass was our surest, as well as principal guide” (59).

Gregg and his traveling party depended on more than just tools. Astronomical readings were helpful as well. He finds their latitude through observations of the sky. He says, “Being compelled to keep a reckoning of our latitude, by which our travel was partly governed, and the sun being now too high at noon for the use of the artificial horizon, we had to be guided entirely by observations of the meridian altitude of the moon, planets, or fixed stars” (194).

For Gregg, it seemed that he was traveling where no one had been before. In the following quote he calls the territory “unexplored wilderness.” However, historians know that this area had been explored many times by various peoples. The difference was that the region was not developed into cities or agricultural settlements like Gregg was used to seeing. He notes, “We were now about to launch upon an unknown region – our route lay henceforth across that unexplored wilderness of which I have so frequently spoken, without either pilot or trail to guide us for nearly 500 miles. We had to depend entirely upon our knowledge of the geographical position of the country for which we were steering, and the indications of a compass and sextant” (182). As someone who lived within the mountainous region of Tennessee or hills of Missouri, having multiple navigation skills became a matter of survival for the long journey across the flat Plains.

While in route to Santa Fe, Gregg and his party encountered a well-known Comanche trader named Big Eagle. Unfamiliar with the terrain that lay ahead, the southbound party requested his assistance. After a conversation in both Spanish and sign, Gregg writes, “Finally, we handed [Tabba-quena/Big Eagle of the Comanche] a sheet of paper and a pencil, signifying at the same time a desire that he would draw us a map of the prairies. This he very promptly executed; and although the draft was somewhat rough, it bore, much to our astonishment, quite a map-like appearance, with a far more accurate delineation of all the principal rivers of the plains – the road from Missouri to Santa Fe, and the different Mexican settlements than is to be found in many of the engraved maps of those regions” (183).

**Isolation on the Plains**

Josiah Gregg responded to the sparseness of Borderlands terrain. At times monotonous and other times bewitching, Gregg experiences the dangerous attraction of a life out of the range of people, cities, and settlements. The following three quotes show his emotional reaction to the landscape.

“These immense bordering plains and even the hills with which they are interspersed are wholly destitute of timber, except a chance scattering tree upon the margins of the bluffs and ravines, which but scantily serves to variegate the landscape” (91).

“Yet I am almost ashamed to confess that scarcely a day passes without my experiencing a pang of regret that I am not now roving at large upon those western plains. Nor do I find my taste peculiar; for I have hardly known a man who has ever become familiar with the kind of life which I have led for so many years, that has not relinquished it with regret” (325).

“…the wild, unsettled, and independent life of the prairie trader makes perfect freedom from nearly every kind of social dependence an absolute necessity of his being. He is in daily, nay, hourly exposure of his life and property, and in the habit of relying upon his own arm and his own gun both for protection and support. (326)